The Benefactor

By Jackson Scholz

"You said you'd pay me," **the boy insisted** stubbornly

After thirty years old Steven Beck was strangely repaid by his dead brother's son

JONATHAN BECK stared thoughtfully at the letter on the desk before him. His lean body fitted loosely in the swivel chair, and blue smoke spiraled lazily from a cigar which he held in his fingers, but had forgotten. His lips quirked downward in a bitter smile, while his eyes, passionless as agate, fastened on the letter.

It was a long letter, a rambling letter, a rather pathetic thing in its clumsy attempt to span the gulf of years and to reëstablish a relationship of blood. It was written in ink—a tribute to its importance — on coarse, ruled paper that had soaked up the ink as it had come from the pen, and had blurred the words in spots. It was signed, "Your devoted Uncle Steven"—an unexpected phrase which had caused the lips of Jonathan Beck to quirk still lower at the corners.

It had taken the writer some time to deliver his message, which he had ap-

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proached in a roundabout, conciliatory manner. It was the roundabout approach which had caused the reader's smile, but it was the message itself which had caused the hardness of his eyes. The letter said:

I knew you'd be glad to advise me on this matter. I haven't saved an awful lot in all these years. The land has needed building up, and the middlemen rob us at every turn, the dirty thieves! I've saved some, but not enough to quit, not for a long time yet, and I'm tired of working. I've been tired for the last ten years.

So I thought, John, that if this fellow had a sound investment I'd put my money into it. He tells me I'd make quite a good profit in a couple of years. I'd like to have more money, John, because I'm old enough to quit; but I'm not a fool—you know that, John. Even though this fellow seems all right, I held him off for a week so I could have a chance to hear from you.

He says he comes from New York. I forgot to ask him his address, but I knew you could tell me about the stock. You've made yourself rich in stocks and such like; so if you tell me it's all right, John, I'll go right ahead.

Then came the signature.

The smoke of Jonathan Beck's cigar became white and thin, then disappeared entirely. The impertinent bellow of a tugboat in the river far beneath blended with the click of typewriters from beyond the glass-walled partition.

Time slipped back for thirty years. Jonathan was nine then, but had matured beyond his age. His mother had died shortly after his birth, and his father followed her shortly after the boy's ninth birthday. The father had come to his death suddenly, horribly, in one of the many accidents to which a farmer is exposed.

The lad had turned blindly to his closest relative, his father's brother, and Uncle Steven had undertaken the responsibility as a religious duty. Uncle Steven was very religious. He had no vices, but somehow or other his neighbors got the impression that he regarded the death of his brother as a piece of good fortune rather than a tragedy. He mourned faithfully, to be sure, but the farm, which they had held as joint tenants under the will of their father, went to Steven, who became very proud and very jealous of his ownership. And then, too, there was the unwelcome responsibility of his nephew.

They were threshing rye one day, and the neighbors, of course, were all there to help. They swapped labor in that part of the country. It was hot and dusty, and the wind, instead of cooling, blew back the chaff from the belching funnel of the threshing machine, forcing the men to tuck their overalls into their boots, and to tie handkerchiefs tightly around their necks to keep out the vicious barbs of the rye.

Young Jonathan, still dazed by the horror of his father's death, carried water for the men. He worked hard, mighty hard, for such a youngster, and one of the neighbors, noticing this, spoke jokingly to the uncle during a lull in the threshing.

"The kid can just about do a man's work, Steven," he said. "You ought to pay him for it."

"Sure, I aim to," Steven replied, and the thresher started its clamor once more for bundles of rye to chew.

Jonathan overheard the remark and took it for a promise. To some extent it displaced the grief that weighed upon his mind. The mind of a child is pliable, and the boy turned toward this new idea with a sort of desperate hope. It helped him to forget his loneliness. He worked with all the strength in his tough little body—worked from morning until night, till even Uncle Steven admitted sourly that he might make a farmer some day.

The thoughts of the lad dwelt wonderingly on the riches that were soon to be his. Of course he would have to wait till the end of the month to get his pay with the rest of the men; but

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what was a month? He would get ten dollars — at least that; and with ten dollars what couldn't he do? He could get lots of things he had wanted for so long—the air rifle, the Indian suit, and ever so many other things. He would be a plutocrat among his friends. He had bragged about it to them, and had already basked in the warmth of their envy.

The end of the month arrived, and he presented himself timidly after the others had left.

"Well, what do *you* want?" demanded Uncle Steven.

"My—my pay," faltered Jonathan.

Uncle Steven looked at him for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed. Jonathan had never heard him laugh so hard before, and it hurt much worse than a scolding.

"But—but you said you'd pay me," the boy insisted stubbornly. "You—you said so."

The uncle dried his eyes with a dirty blue bandanna.

"Of course I said it," he admitted. "Sure I did; and I will, too, when you're big enough to earn it. Now get out of here and let me alone!"

Something seemed to snap in Jonathan—something far down deep inside him. The next night he ran away.

That was thirty years ago — thirty years of hardship and constant struggle. He had never forgiven Uncle Steven, because somehow or other it was not his nature to forgive. Besides, the hurt had been too cruel ever to heal. He had always intended to even the score some day. The idea had always been in the back of his mind—something to be attended to in due course.

The letter, however, which now lay before him, had not entered into his calculations. It added a touch of satire to the situation. It was rather an artistic boomerang of fate, thought Jonathan Beck.

He knew the stock in question—knew it rather well, in fact, because he happened to be promoting it himself. He knew, too, just how valueless it was. Uncle Steven was certain to lose any money he put into it.

He laid the dead cigar on an ash tray, and reached for a fountain pen. He was chuckling grimly to himself as he drew a telegraph blank from the drawer of his desk. The opportunity for which he had waited thirty years had presented itself with almost uncanny nicety. Uncle Steven had thrust into his hand an effective weapon of vengeance.

The pen poised over the blank as he deliberately prolonged the pleasure.

"They say I'm hard," he mused, "and by God they're right! They say I always pay my debts, and they're right about that, too." He smiled grimly. "They're afraid of me, because they know I trust no living human; but I learned that lesson at the age of nine. My uncle taught it to me —damn him!"

Suddenly he stiffened in his chair, as if assailed by an unexpected thought. He sat for several moments, thinking swiftly; then he relaxed again with a soft, mirthless laugh.

"It's incredible," he muttered. "It's absolutely unbelievable. Funny I never thought of it before!" He shook his head slowly, as if the idea bewildered him. "Yes, sir, he taught it to me—hardness, distrust, ruthlessness—all of them, the very things which have helped me to succeed." For a long moment he stared into space, reflecting on the bitter humor of the situation. "I'm indebted to him," he went on. "That old hypocrite who has had plenty to retire on for the last fifteen years is actually—my benefactor!"

He pronounced the last words with careful irony as he lowered the pen and wrote a few brief lines—a message to one of his salesmen in the West.

"Lay off the job you're working on," were the instructions. "Don't sell any of our stuff to Steven Beck. Letter follows."

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